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Beginner CFL learners' perceptions of language difficulty in a task-based teaching and learning (TBTL) environment in Denmark

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1. Introduction

With China's economic growth, an increasing number of non-native speakers are learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) worldwide. Generally, non-native learners of Chinese are located in two groups: international students studying in China and students learning Chinese outside China. These two groups are distinct in various ways. For example, CFL learners in China are usually described as highly motivated with the goal of possessing an advanced level of Chinese (Xu & Yao, 2014). CFL students overseas differ due to their linguistic, societal and cultural contexts. Studies in Europe (Starr, 2009), Australia (Orton, 2008) and North America (Cruikshank & Tsung, 2011) report decreasing motivation among beginner learners, often causing lower retention rates, as a major challenge in CFL. Decreased motivation is often attributed to the difficulty of the language (Orton, 2008; Scrimgeour, 2011; Wen, 1997) and the mismatch between traditional Chinese pedagogy and learners' needs in Western educational contexts (Orton, 2008; Starr, 2009).

Among the eight universities in Denmark, three offer Chinese as a major subject while two universities offer it as a minor subject (including the university where this study was conducted) (Wang & Du, 2016). The teaching and learning methods of university-level Chinese courses in Denmark are focused on language forms and often rely on lecture-centred teaching methods (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012). Thus, we have observed low retention rates for Chinese subjects at all five of these universities. With this in mind, Orton states, 'there is a concerted, sound and innovative development in pedagogy for Chinese' (2008, p. 6) and suggests teachers create an encouraging and motivating learning environment to enhance successful learning experiences. A communicative approach is often recommended for teaching and learning less commonly taught languages (Gor & Vatz, 2009).

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With these considerations, we explored task-based teaching and learning (TBTL) as an instructional approach to help beginner learners in Denmark to learn Chinese. This approach focuses on engaging learners in learning a language by using it, and is increasingly employed in foreign language studies (Ellis, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Willis & Willis, 2007). The use of TBTL is not new and has been endorsed as an effective method of developing language proficiency for communication goals (Edwards & Willis, 2005; Skehan, 2003). However, the prevailing literature on TBTL is mainly based on empirical findings from studies conducted with advanced foreign language learners of English. Little is known concerning TBTL among beginner Chinese learners. In addition, the majority of learners studied in the accessible TBTL literature are foreign language and cultural studies majors. Few studies have investigated the perceived difficulty of Chinese among beginner Chinese learners who are non-language majors in a TBTL environment in a European educational context. Even fewer studies have examined the contextual pedagogical factors (teacher, selected materials, activity design, group work, etc.) that may decrease students' perceived levels of language difficulty.

This study was designed to explore university beginner learners' perceptions of CFL difficulty and TBTL in order to gain understanding of the difficulties that non-native beginners from all disciplines face in an overseas CFL context and to discover what pedagogical factors may help reduce beginners' perceived difficulty level of CFL. Beginners were the target group, as most Chinese courses in Europe are basic and non-specialist (Starr, 2009), as is the case in Denmark.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on CFL

In general, the CFL literature agrees that Chinese is a difficult language for non-native speakers (Avounghansou & Guan, 2015; Halliday, 2014; Hu, 2010; Moser, 1991, pp. 59–70; Scrimgeour, 2011; Wang & Ruan, 2016; Zhang & Li, 2010). Students may enrol in a Chinese course because of their interest in the country, Chinese culture or even Chinese calligraphy, or to develop marketable skills (Starr, 2009). However, when students begin to understand the amount of time and effort required to learn the tones and characters, their interest often wanes (Wen, 1997). Specifically, Hu (2010) identified six major difficulties: grammar, aural reception, vocabulary, oral production, pronunciation and recall.

Previous studies have analysed possible reasons for the challenges experienced by beginner learners in less commonly taught languages such as Chinese. First, there is the divergence of the language from European languages in terms of its orthographic system (Everson, 1998), the lack of vocabulary overlap between Chinese and European languages (Starr, 2009), and its tonal character (Ma, Gong, Gao, & Xiang, 2017). Second, there is a mismatch between learners' expectations and reality concerning how much effort is required for certain achievements (Wen, 1997). Finally, perceiving this gap, students' affective learning is negatively impacted, that often leads to decreased motivation (Samimy & Tabuse, 1992). In the following sections, critical issues of CFL within and outside China are discussed.

2.1.1. CFL in China

Since much of the research is conducted by Chinese scholars and published in Chinese journals (Ma et al., 2017), research on critical issues in CFL in China published in English remains sparse. In their systematic review, the authors outline the increase of research interest in pedagogical innovation to provide tailored instructional approaches to help CFL learners manage the difficult target language (Ma et al., 2017). Recent literature on key pedagogical issues concerning language proficiency, enhancement of one of the four language skills, language-character integration vs. separation, and teaching materials development are included in this review.

There seems to be increased attention on concepts embedded in Western language pedagogy such as constructivism and communicative approaches (Mao, 2010; Shao, 2013; Zhao, 2008). For example, Zhao (2008) discusses the idea and possibility of establishing task-based oral Chinese teaching systems to solve existing problems such as student discontent with oral communication classes and low Chinese speaking levels. Nevertheless, most studies published in Chinese journals are non-empirical (Ma et al., 2017) and few examine student perspectives, especially regarding language difficulty and motivation in relation to innovative pedagogy.

Xu and Yao (2014) explored the factors influencing learner motivation, such as teaching and learning strategies and students' individual backgrounds and interests. The results suggest the language-character separation approach is significantly better than the language-character integration approach in improving students' integrative motivation and learning experience. In addition, experience of Chinese culture may enhance learner motivation (Ding, 2014). An empirical study of 900 students and 150 teachers by Ni (2007) examined the needs of international learners of Chinese in China demonstrated that students have a strong need to understand the learning goals and the learning process, enjoy learning Chinese together with classmates of similar Chinese proficiency and different nationalities, and prefer to work in groups of three to five.

2.1.2. CFL outside China

Research on critical issues facing CFL learners outside China is recently gaining attention due to the expansion of learners' groups and the challenges encountered locally (Moloney & Xu, 2015; Wang & Ruan, 2016). In general, existing research on CFL from Europe, North America and Australia theoretically emphasizes constructivism and communicative approaches to language education and prioritizes student learning and motivation (Cruickshank & Tsung, 2011; Du & Kirkebæk, 2012; Liu & Bianco, 2007; Moloney & Xu, 2015; Ruan, Zhang, & Leung, 2016; Tsung & Cruickshank, 2011). From this Western

viewpoint, overseas CFL is dominated by a 'traditional' Chinese view of language pedagogy (Chen, 2015; Hu, 2002; Wang, Moloney, & Li, 2013) that focuses on grammar-translation approaches, memorisation of structural patterns and vocabulary and systematic study of grammatical patterns (Chi, 1989; Moloney & Xu, 2012; Walton, 1989; Wang & Kirkpatrick, 2012; Wang et al., 2013). This is problematic because the focus on linguistics does not yet offer the help that is really needed (Halliday, 2014). The gap between so-called 'Chinese pedagogy' and local learners' needs remains the biggest challenge facing CFL outside China (Moloney & Wang, 2016). Thus, the increased enrolment of CFL overseas learners has not led to an equivalent expansion of their achievements (Orton, 2008).

'Chinese pedagogy' is considered as another major factor that decreases the motivation of beginner learners in Europe, Australia and the U.S. The majority of CFL teachers in these countries are native-Chinese speakers educated in China. Chinese pedagogy influences their beliefs and experiences of foreign-language teaching and learning and they tend to use methods often based on traditional academic models focusing on classical Chinese (Starr, 2009), grammar-translation and accuracy in the language (Moloney & Xu, 2012; Orton, 2008). Teaching resources centre on language textbooks (Chi, 1989). Such teachers tend to prioritise language proficiency over learners' needs and motivation, especially for beginner learners (Chen, 2015). This teaching approach to L1 Chinese language education in China may not fit the learning needs of CFL students outside China (Moloney & Xu, 2012). This approach also includes a lack of intercultural awareness, understanding and competences (Moloney & Xu, 2012; Moloney, 2013).

Efforts have been made to improve CFL from the perspectives of Western language acquisition theories (Everson, 2009; Scrimgeour, 2011; Zhang, 2016) and curriculum development (Li & Zhang, 2016; Zhang & Li, 2010). A few initiatives to diversified approaches to CFL effectiveness have been implemented. For example, involving teachers in pedagogical innovation and classroom research (Chen, 2015; Du & Kirkebæk, 2012; Moloney & Wang, 2016) and enhancing transformative learning and intercultural pedagogy for native teachers of Chinese have been utilized (Chen, 2015; Everson, 2016; Kirkebæk & Du, 2014; Moloney, 2013; Orton, 2011; Zhou & Li, 2016). Other studies report introducing technology in CFL, such as interactive whiteboards (Xu & Moloney, 2011), ICT (Lin, Huang, & Chen, 2014; Wu, 2016), online language learning (Wang, 2016a,b), virtual TBTL (Pasfield-Neofitou, Grant, & Huang, 2016), and digital tools for Chinese character acquisition (McLaren & Bettinson, 2016).

However, current CFL research outside China is predominantly theoretical, exploratory and provisional and many instructional discussions centre on language forms instead of learners. Most empirical studies address teachers' beliefs, identities and professional development efforts, and many are small-scale and descriptive (Cruickshank & Tsung, 2011). In a systematic review of CFL studies in the U.S., Ke (2012) reports that existing studies focus on the development of pronunciation, reading, grammar competence and discipline. Limited empirical evidence is documented on pedagogical initiatives and classroom experience from students' perspectives (Cruickshank & Tsung, 2011; Ke, 2012; Wang & Ruan, 2016). Considering the current gaps in the CFL literature, this study explores pedagogical enhancement that prioritizes learners' needs.

2.2. TBTL pedagogy

2.2.1. Defining TBTL

Task-based teaching and learning is not new in foreign language education, particularly in teaching English as a foreign language. In the task literature, various definitions of 'task' have been offered differing in both scope and formulation (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 2–12). For example, Richards and Rodgers (2001) define task as 'an activity or goal that is carried out using language, such as finding a solution to a puzzle, reading a map and giving directions' (p. 224). Edwards and Willis (2005) describe a task as 'an activity that has a non-linguistic purpose or goal, with a clear outcome, and that uses any or all of the four language skills in its accomplishment, by conveying meaning in a way that reflects real-world language use' (p. 19). Skehan (2003, 2014) stresses the connection of tasks to real-life language use. From a language acquisition point of view, Nunan (2004) points out tasks are used as a means of enhancing language production, interaction, the negotiation of meaning, the processing of input, and focus on form.

Despite the diversity of perspectives in defining TBTL, the existing literature shares two common focuses: first, communicative language use and meaning instead of grammatical forms, and second, motivation in learning (Du, 2012). There is no agreed-upon definition of a task, but there seems to be general agreement on the criteria a language activity must satisfy (Ellis, 2003, p. 223), namely: 1) the primary focus should be on meaning; 2) there should be some kind of information 'gap'; 3) learners should rely primarily on their own resources; and 4) there should be a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language. In addition, co-operation is an important aspect of a communicative approach. Therefore, co-operative activities involving small groups of learners in the classroom could be useful (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

TBTL challenges educators more than primarily linguistic structure-oriented approaches (Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010). From a holistic point of view, educators are expected to design tasks, help learners understand the purpose and goals of TBTL, establish an active learning atmosphere and motivate learners to engage in communicative dialogues and interactions during task performance. Finally, language teachers are expected to encourage students to reflect on their experiences, leading to self-evaluation and a greater appreciation of meaning (Du, 2012), and to support learners in coping with linguistic and cognitive challenges in the process (Nunan, 2004).

2.2.2. Benefits and challenges of TBTL

The rich body of research reports the overall effectiveness and the challenges of using tasks in enhancing students' learning of foreign languages. Studies on students' perceptions of TBTL reported improved student interest in and motivation for learning English as a foreign language (EFL) via TBTL through participating in task-based classroom activities (Hadi, 2013; Mozgalina, 2015; Park, 2012), increased engagement (Mozgalina, 2015) and enjoyment (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). Regarding language-learning outcomes, studies also document improvements in learners' oral skills, such as vocabulary building, understanding through listening, fluency (Chacón, 2012), use of the target language (Tinker Sachs, 2007) and the ability to transfer classroom learning to real-life applications (Macías, 2004). Recently, research also documents the use of TBTL in languages and social contexts beyond the English-speaking world. For example, Leaver and Kaplan (2004), report using TBTL in Eastern European language programs in the U.S. leads to increased student satisfaction, improved intrinsic reward, greater risk-taking in practicing a difficult language and higher proficiency than in other classes.

The implementation of TBTL pedagogy in foreign language education has challenges. First, some learners may prefer a grammar-focused approach instead of active learning-focused pedagogy. There are learners that prefer systematic and explicit grammar instruction due to their belief in the importance of language form (Carless, 2007; Lai, Zhao, & Wang, 2011) while others prefer the teacher to simply convey knowledge and answer their questions (Sheehan, 2005). Second, cultural influences on learning habits can restrict students from participating actively in teamwork in some environments (Carless, 2003, 2007; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007). Third, low proficiency in the target language makes it difficult for learners to use the new language in a TBTL setting (Carless, 2003; Duran & Ramaut, 2006; Kim, 2009; Li, 1998; Willis & Willis, 2007). Finally, recent literature emphasised the importance of teaching design where inappropriate task design in terms of task type, difficulty level or planning may affect student motivation and engagement levels (Mozgalina, 2015) and the quality of their interactions (Geng & Ferguson, 2013; Kim & Tracy-Ventura, 2013).

2.3. TBTL in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL)

Literature on TBTL in CFL, particularly outside China, remains sparse. Exploratory studies on implementing TBTL in CFL in Denmark report TBTL satisfies the learning preferences of Danish learners and enhances beginners' interest in the language and their participation in classroom activities in lower secondary schools and adult education (Bao & Du, 2015; Bao & Kirkebæk, 2013). It is important for language teachers who design tasks for TCFL to consider affective and learning situation factors that can encourage learners' intrinsic motivation (Ruan, Duan & Du, 2015a,b). In addition, the implementation of new pedagogies required teachers communicate to students the goals of the new pedagogy, how it should work and the expected outcomes (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012). Students must understand the new pedagogy (Bao & Kirkebæk, 2013) in order to maximise its results. Therefore, this study explores how beginner CFL learners perceive the difficulty of Chinese in a TBTL pedagogical setting and the factors that make educational activities helpful in reducing learner-perceived difficulty levels. The following research questions are formulated:

- 1) Do beginner CFL learners' perceptions of language difficulty change in a task-based teaching and learning (TBTL) environment? If so,
- 2) What pedagogical factors facilitate changes in beginner learners' perceptions of language difficulty?

3. Methods

3.1. Research context

In 2012, a Chinese language elective was offered at Aalborg University in Denmark. The overall goal was to encourage all students, especially students outside language and culture disciplines, to learn one foreign language in addition to English from an unfamiliar culture, such as Chinese. The course was structured to include six language tasks combined with teacher-designed content (see Appendix 1). The design of the language tasks followed the four criteria suggested by Ellis (2003): the tasks followed a work plan; their primary focus was meaning; the tasks encouraged real-world processes of language use; the tasks engaged cognitive processes and had a clearly defined communicative outcome. In task design, the selection of topics and content must be 1) relevant to learners' real life experiences; 2) associated with the target culture; 3) involve meaningful communicative practices in relation to beginner learners' interests; and 4) include participative and interactive activities. The course was collaboratively designed and delivered by two native-speaking Chinese teachers who received professional training in China for teaching Chinese overseas. The teachers had been living and working in Denmark for nearly two years prior to teaching the course. Thus, the course provided authentic opportunities for learners to interact with native-speaker teachers from the target culture (Wang, 2016a,b).

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In their proposal for further CFL research studies, Cruickshank and Tsung (2011) note that further research is needed into the contexts and learners in mixed modes. Accordingly, to obtain a comprehensive understanding of beginner learners'

perspectives of CFL in TBTL, a mixed-method approach was designed for data generation in this study. Convergent design was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data capitalising on strengths of each paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This research design also provides opportunities to converge, corroborate, triangulate and validate results (Bryman, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The two types of data were collected and analysed concurrently, but in separate forms, before being merged at the interpretation stage (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

3.2.1. Survey

A survey combining closed and open questions was used to provide an overall picture of students' learning preferences and feedbacks to teaching. At the start of the course, a pre-course survey was conducted to capture students' motivation and backgrounds using a list of open-ended questions such as prior knowledge of the target language, preferred methods of learning a foreign language (e.g. English), and expectations for learning Chinese. Additionally, students were asked to rank their response to one question (Appendix 2), 'How difficult do you assume learning Chinese to be', on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from one to five - 'very difficult' to 'very easy'. At the end of the course, a post-course survey was administered to students to capture their perceptions of the overall difficulty of the course and the difficulty of learning Chinese, perceptions of the TBTL method and content and the students' willingness to continue learning the target language (Appendix 2). Items used a 5-point Likert scale. Students were provided with opportunities to elaborate on their response in open comments.

Questions from both surveys were validated by two educational researchers with expertise in teaching all three languages – Chinese, Danish and English and three CFL teachers in Denmark. These individuals provided inputs regarding how to better phrase the questions in the English and at the same time remain suitable for Danish native speakers' understanding. Furthermore, the surveys had been translated into Chinese and Danish and back translated to ensure the original meanings remained unchanged prior to conducting a pilot study with five non-native Chinese learners. The survey questions were revised according to their feedback. In particular, there were a few questions rephrased because of the concern for language difficulty. The surveys were administered as paper-and-pencil forms to all 188 students from nine classes (4 classes in 2012 and 5 classes in 2013). These 188 students (response rate was $170/188 = 90.42\%$) responded to both the pre- and post-course surveys. Of the participants, 87.8% were Danish and 13.2% were international students. Furthermore, 55.3% were male and 44.7% were female. Participants were from diverse disciplines across the university (engineering and science: 37.2%, humanities: 38.3%, medicine: 4.8%, social sciences: 19.7%). SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data. A *t*-test was used to compare the results from 2012 to 2013 while a paired *t*-test was used to investigate the difference in the perceived difficulty level of learning Chinese between the pre- and post-surveys. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

3.2.2. Group interviews and participant observation

Nine group interviews were conducted after the post-course survey was completed with 44 voluntary students, 22 females and 22 males, from eight different disciplines. Only post-course interviews were conducted because the participants were beginner learners with no prior knowledge or experience of the target language prior to the course. The group interviews (guidelines seen in Appendix 3) were conducted to triangulate the survey data, and more importantly, gain further insight into students' experiences and viewpoints on various aspects of learning Chinese during the course. Interview data were coded and analysed using Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) meaning condensation method. Student responses to questions were categorised by class and student numbers.

Participant observations were used to generate qualitative data in order to supplement and triangulate data gathered from other techniques. The teachers recorded field notes of their observations of students' performance. Observation data were analysed along with other qualitative data such as the group interviews and answers to open-ended questions.

3.2.3. Data analysis

The overall analysis process was conducted in teams through several rounds of comparing multiple data sources. Teachers, who are also co-authors of the study, played a dual role participating in the course, task design and course delivery as well as conducting the interviews and discussing the data analysis. Involving teachers in the data generation and analysis process can potentially create sensibility and limit the reliability of the results. However, this process was designed to provide an insider's perspective on the implementation of a new pedagogy (Norton, 2009) and was potentially beneficial when using mixed methods for gathering information (Townsend, 2010). Previous research has demonstrated how efforts have been made to involve EFL teachers in classroom research to examine the effect of TBTL implementation (Edwards & Willis, 2005). In a TBTL setting, teachers spend a relatively large amount of time observing student group work, which provides them more information about student progress (Leaver & Kaplan, 2004). Furthermore, involving teachers in research can enhance research-based education and improve teaching quality by inviting teachers to critically examine their classroom (Du & Kirkebaek, 2012) and become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987).

4. Findings

This section provides an overview of the quantitative data analysis results and presents findings from merging qualitative data from surveys, group interviews and participant observations.

4.1. Overview of the results of the quantitative data analysis

The results illustrate the participants' perceptions of the level of difficulty learning Chinese before and after the course. Before the course, most participants thought learning Chinese was highly difficult ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.84$). After the course, they thought learning Chinese was moderate in difficulty ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.90$). Paired t -tests of the perceived difficulty level of learning Chinese between the pre- and post-course surveys showed a significant difference ($N = 170$, $t = 14.15$, $p < 0.001$), indicating significantly changed perceptions.

Quantitative analysis reports participants' overall satisfaction with the course in terms of supporting their Chinese learning ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 0.59$) and the achievement of learning expectations ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.79$). Students reported high satisfaction with course content and materials ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.66$) and with TBTL methods in terms of motivation and aligned learning preferences ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.77$). Learning about Chinese culture was regarded as highly relevant to learning the language ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.76$). The difficulty level of the course was evaluated as moderate ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.86$).

A paired-sample t -test shows that participants from 2013 assumed learning Chinese to be easier than those from 2012 ($t = -2.00$, $P < .05$). Other comparisons of items between these two years were not significant. Thus, year was not considered as a factor for further analysis. Based on a general understanding of students' perceptions of the difficulty level of CFL provided by quantitative data analysis, qualitative data (including responses to open-ended questions and interview data) analyses are presented below for additional inquiry regarding what happened to the students during TBTL learning processes and the contextual factors that influenced the change in their perceived level of difficulty.

4.2. Do beginner CFL learners' perceptions of the language difficulty change in a task-based teaching and learning (TBTL) environment?

As with the quantitative data results, open-ended short responses from surveys indicated that participants found learning Chinese easier after attending the course. On the pre-survey, students reported their anxiety about language structure and roughly one-third of the students voiced concerns the course would focus on grammar and memorising vocabulary. Over two-thirds of respondents wrote in the post-survey that they found it easier than they expected to learn Chinese through the course. Interview findings echoed the general change in learners' perceptions, but variation in changes was observed. Around three-quarters of the interviewed students claimed that Chinese was easier to learn than they had previously expected. However, some understood that the reduced perceived level of difficulty might have been due to the teachers' choice of starting with only pinyin:

Firstly, I thought it would be more difficult, with more signs (characters), more grammar, but it wasn't. We started by using only pinyin, and basic conversations and topics. I learned much more than I expected and it was easier than I thought. (ES2)

I expected it to be very hard, because it is very different from anything I know, so I was surprised that it is actually doable. (BS1)

Students' perceptions of the difficulty level were triangulated asking the question whether they would continue to study Chinese. Of the participants in the post-course survey, 61.7% responded affirmatively, 32.4% would consider it, 4.8% did not know and 1.1% believed they would not. In qualitative data from the survey, ten students confirmed their plans to study Chinese as a minor subject, 15 mentioned working in China as a career option and over 20 suggested the university should offer continuing levels of Chinese. A few survey respondents reported that Chinese was more difficult than they expected. Although most expressed confidence and interest in continuing to learn Chinese in the group interviews, a few, realising that they had to learn much more than pinyin, expressed concern. They felt the tones were already very difficult, and characters would lead to additional difficulty.

In summary, quantitative analysis detected a general trend of decreasing perceived difficulty. However, qualitative analyses identified different patterns. For example, students identified pinyin, four tones and Chinese characters as foreseen difficulties in pre-survey open-ended questions. Interview data suggested that most (approximately three-quarters) gained confidence in learning Chinese as it proved to be less challenging than expected. However, a smaller portion (approximately one-quarter) of interviewed students expressed similar or even increasing concerns regarding pinyin and Chinese characters after the course than at the outset of the semester, with a similar perceived level of difficulty. More inquiry is needed to examine what pedagogical factors may help reduce beginner CFL learners' perceptions of language difficulty.

4.3. What pedagogical factors contribute to the change in beginner learners' perceptions of language difficulty?

To answer research question 2, this section presents qualitative findings by merging data from the surveys, interviews and observations, organized by the themes that emerged from the post-survey. In the pre-survey, the most frequently mentioned preferred ways of learning a foreign language were: 1) communicating with people from the culture, 2) learning through diverse, dynamic, fun activities, 3) group work. The factors most reflected upon in the post-surveys were: 1) teachers, 2) interactive activities and communicative practices from TBTL, 3) integrating cultural information into task topics.

4.3.1. Native-speaker teachers

Extensive data from the post-survey showed that students appreciated teachers who are native speakers from the target culture. This offered students authentic experiences and an intercultural atmosphere from speaking English and Chinese together. Conversing with native speakers helped students learn 'real' Chinese with correct pronunciation. Getting to know people from the target culture furthered their long-term learning objectives, traveling to and possibly working in China. As a student noted,

Speaking Chinese to a Chinese person was very motivating and very exciting, because you got to talk Chinese to some people who exactly would understand if you pronounce everything correctly and could correct you and reply in good Chinese. (FS3)

In the post-survey, the majority of respondents referred to the teacher as an important motivating factor to make learning Chinese easier,

I used to think teachers from China could be very rigorous and demanding, but to my surprise she is quite easy and trying to motivate instead of pushing us to memorise difficult stuff. (Post-survey)

The teacher is great, a good surprise. She brought in so many activities and they are all fun and interesting. She is so good at motivating us to make me feel learning Chinese is not that difficult any more (Post-survey)

Usually a teacher makes a subject very difficult to get our attention, but the Chinese teacher kept saying Chinese is easy and not as difficult as we thought, then we tried little by little, it actually helped to feel it is less difficult now. (Post-survey)

Many students expressed their perception of the important role of the teacher in making a difficult subject easier. Instead of lecturing on grammar and correcting mistakes, the teachers were seen as facilitators who emphasised motivating students.

4.3.2. A TBTL instructional approach

Around 80% of the respondents stated in the open questions they found the TBTL method helpful and motivating for CFL. Many Danish students were accustomed to interactive ways of learning foreign languages and they found TBTL for CFL 'natural'. A few interviewees indicated they learned more through this method than through the lecture-based methods, based on their previous experiences learning a foreign language. Many students wrote in the post-survey that dynamic task-based classroom activities made learning a difficult language fun.

I love performing; I love role-play. I can be shy sometimes, but it was fun, especially the task-based procedures. (BS1)

The interviewed students also differentiated between knowing and using the language. Many students stated that using the language makes it easier to remember, leading to more 'real' learning, rather than merely repeating the teacher's words. Some students especially liked the learning activities that encouraged them to use the language in real life:

Task topics are different but all useful to student life. For example, I can say celebrating birthdays in Chinese to my friends and family. When I can use the language, it motivates me to learn more. (ES5)

The task performance process provided opportunities for students to practise speaking Chinese, thereby allowing them to grow in confidence through practice.

I thought it was going to be like more traditional teaching where we just say the words and repeat, or say another word and repeat ... I was also surprised [at] the task-based learning; I didn't expect that, but I liked it ... I am a bit shy, but now I have to talk to people in foreign languages ... you have to be responsible for your own learning and you have to, yeah, speak it instead of just hearing it, that made it easier to remember what to say. (DS3)

Social interaction was facilitated during the task procedures and most students recognised collaborative learning during group work as an important learning method.

I also think it [social interaction] is good, because we have opportunities to talk to people that we wouldn't talk to [otherwise]. (FS2)

I like group work. That is how we learn from each other in everyday life, we do project work together in our PBL environment. (GS2)

Students expected collaborative learning to be useful. Although many students expressed their wish to learn a new foreign language collaboratively at the beginning of the course, they reported varied experiences in the TBTL environment. According to classroom observations, students acted excited to work with peers from different disciplines. However, sometimes they seemed to be challenged to agree on how to proceed with tasks in the limited class time available. In the post-survey, half the students mentioned group work issues such as team-building were time consuming making it challenging for short courses. This could be due to students' different understanding of and ways to organise group work because of their discipline backgrounds and students' limited proficiency in Chinese restricts them from expressing themselves freely, so they may turn to English or Danish, limiting the effectiveness of group work. Students indicated that,

The idea is good, but right now we are also busy with other work so we don't have much time for this Our group didn't really have the time to prepare for the Chinese class, and that was a pity. (ES1).

Our pronunciation isn't very good, so if you hear someone pronounce it wrong, then you begin to pronounce it wrong yourself, so it is very hard to keep the right pronunciation. (BS2)

4.3.3. Integrating culture into task topics

Most students thought the content was relevant to their lives. The task topics involved a wide range of useful situations in intercultural communication settings, such as self-introduction, meeting new people, ordering food, tourism and other aspects of Chinese culture. As most students commented, these topics were appropriate for beginners. The topics were aligned with initial interests when learning a new language, combined linguistic and cultural aspects, and invited learners into meaningful conversations from the start. As one mentioned,

The topics are very interesting and good for learning basic language. I thought we would learn something much more difficult; this makes it easier to start, and motivating when we can start conversations from the beginning. (AS6)

Integrating Chinese culture was an important aspect of the task design, although few students in the pre-survey mentioned exploring the target culture as their preferred way of learning a foreign language. Post-survey results and interviews included positive feedback from students on this topic.

Chinese culture and language are closely related. If you understand the people and culture, it's maybe easier to learn the language. (Post-survey)

You have to imagine, pretend and perform; imagine you are in China, in a meeting with people [from different cultures], so it is very important. (BS7)

4.4. Variation and change

Findings from this study demonstrated several variations and changes in students' learning preferences. In the pre-survey, nearly one-third of the students mentioned they expected the course to follow the classical way of gaining listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in separate sessions. Three students preferred to learn grammar at the beginning. Our group interviews and observation findings suggest this may be because some students had no prior experience of communicative and student-centred approaches to foreign language learning. At the beginning of the course, some students questioned how the four skills would be covered and during the course and they started to see the value of integrated approaches of learning Chinese that combines culture and diverse participative activities. However, the post-survey revealed that ten students expected to learn more 'real' Chinese, such as grammar and characters. During the interviews, one student stated,

I do prefer it that way (sitting and taking notes). Whenever the teacher says something, I would quickly note it down to remember how to pronounce it, because that is one thing I am good at. (DS1)

In this study, teachers also observed varied levels of student motivation. While the teachers made efforts to lower the overall difficulty level in order to motivate and retain the majority of students, several students from each class wished for a higher level of content and attainment.

5. Discussion and reflection

This study explored beginner CFL learners' perceived language difficulty level. There were no participants in this study who had prior experience of CFL. Most expected Chinese to be a highly difficult language to learn. After a 2.5-month course using TBTL pedagogy, many of the participants found CFL easier than what they expected prior to the class. This change of perception can be attributed to a range of pedagogical factors.

One factor is native-speaking teachers. Previous studies on overseas CFL suggested using teachers who share the native language of the learners for beginners because native Chinese-speaking teachers tend to make CFL difficult (Avoungnansou & Guan, 2015; Halliday, 2014). Recent literature highlights the tension between native-speaking Chinese teachers and the local pedagogical context (Moloney, 2013; Orton, 2008, 2011; Scrimgeour & Wilson, 2009; Wang & Du, 2016) and that professional development is needed for teachers to develop intercultural pedagogy in a global context (Kramsch, 2014; Moloney & Xu, 2012; Moloney, 2013). In the current study, teachers with a Chinese educational background completed a six months' on-site professional development program before teaching Danish students. This included learning about Danish educational culture, students' needs, critical pedagogy and intercultural teaching and learning theories. They participated in evidence-based educational research and taught collaboratively with local teachers. In addition, they were integrated into the local educational context to conduct classroom research. The well-trained native Chinese teachers, with a thorough understanding of Danish culture, beginner learners' specific needs and intercultural pedagogical approaches, might have designed relevant language learning tasks that motivate student learning. Therefore, beginner learners regard these teachers as a highly motivating factor.

Another factor is the design of tasks that emphasised peer interactions and collaborative dialogue (De la Colina & García Mayo, 2007; Swain, 2000; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). During task processes, students participated in communication-oriented activities requiring them to interact and collaborate with peers (Burrows, 2008; García Mayo & Alcón Soler, 2013; Mackey & Goo, 2007; Pica, 2013; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Peer interaction helped students increase their confidence and find the learning process meaningful and enjoyable (Bao & Du, 2015; Hadi, 2013; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Park, 2012; Ruan et al., 2015a,b). Both teachers and students in this study articulated these major benefits. This finding aligns with recent literature on non-native CFL learners' preferences for social strategies in CFL in China (Ni, 2007).

Relevance of content was also regarded as an important source of motivation for the beginner learners in this study. This feedback is often reflected in the literature on Danish learners' preferences for foreign language study (Du & Kirkebak, 2012; Kirkebak & Du, 2014). In the course model, the content chosen for the tasks was linked to topics in Chinese culture, due to the belief that a holistic understanding of the language motivates beginner learners (Kirkebak & Du, 2014). Understanding the target culture helps reduce the distance between L1 and the target language and motivate learners of less commonly taught languages with inherent linguistic difficulty (Gor & Vatz, 2009; Xing, 2006). Recent literature on CFL in China also identifies the positive role of learning Chinese culture on learners' motivation to study the language (Ding, 2014).

The language-character separation approach appears to be another important factor motivating beginners in this study. Due to the difficulty of the language and the linguistic distance from European languages, it takes two to four times longer for a European to learn CFL than another European language (Starr, 2009). However, time allocation for CFL is limited for both teachers and learners. It is often the case in CFL overseas settings that there are inadequate opportunities for learning characters (Chen, 2015). This study chose to focus on pinyin and minimised the character component, although both teachers and students wanted more time for characters. CFL studies debate the importance of language character separation versus integration (references needed), but the results emerging from this study suggest that in the given context a separation approach is practical and realistic enhancing beginner learners' interests and motivation. This implication is supported by recent literature on CFL in China regarding how the separation approach may increase learners' integrative motivation (Xu & Yao, 2014).

This study also identified obstacles that may limit TBTL impacts. First, although this study indicated high motivation and engagement among beginner learners in a TBTL environment, it also observed that learners had a limited capability to communicate in the target language during the tasks and that they often relied on English or Danish for discussion and preparation. Previous research has attributed this challenge to learners' low linguistic proficiency (Carless, 2003; Duran & Ramaut, 2006; Willis & Willis, 2007). Some have argued that TBTL should be employed mainly for learners above the beginner level. In addition, previous studies suggest that collaborative learning in EFL can be challenging when students have no prior experience of working in groups (Carless, 2007; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007) or when they have different learning preferences (Carless, 2007; Lai et al., 2011; Sheehan, 2005). Most of the participants in the current study reported preference to and prior experiences of working in groups. However, they still experienced the change of collaboration in TBTL. This may suggest in a TBTL environment for CFL beginners, group work may play a dual role motivating beginners by providing opportunities to interact, but also hampering students' ability to learn correct pronunciation. Future studies could minimise this challenge by using strategies of task repetition to enhance learner-learner interaction (Kim & Tracy-Ventura, 2013).

Second, time constraint remains a challenge in CFL overseas. With limited time allocation, teachers may shorten the time for interactive activities and rely on teacher-centred approaches in order to cover sufficient content (Chen, 2015). In this study teachers prioritised task processes and maximised opportunities for learner interaction and this led to challenges of time management and increased unpredictability in terms of how much content could be covered in class. As Gor and Vatz (2009) suggest, teaching and learning less commonly taught languages requires additional effort and resources.

Third, a number of dilemmas regarding teaching design were exposed. Mozgalina (2015) suggests that providing students with choice in their task design does not necessarily lead to an experience of choice and task motivation. With this consideration, beginner learners in this study were not involved in choosing content or group formation for task processes. Classroom observation and interview findings identified few patterns in these processes. However, a number of highly engaged students expressed a desire to participate in the choice of content and to make choices for group formation and task process. Task planning has been identified as an important aspect of task design that influences the quality of interaction. For example, teacher-led planning may encourage greater accuracy, though not necessarily great fluency, and individual planning may promote greater complexity (Geng & Ferguson, 2013). Though these possibilities were taken into consideration for the teaching plan and task design, no clear patterns from students' feedback could be identified in this study. This is likely due to the lack of proficiency of the beginner learners.

6. Conclusion

This study is limited in the following ways. First, it was conducted with the teachers' active involvement that could have created sensitivity in the data generation process and bias in the data analysis. Additionally, it merely focused on students' perceptions of language difficulty. Comparing students' perception with other sources of evidence, for example, examination results or student academic performance could be very valuable.

To conclude, this study indicates that motivation is essential for less commonly taught languages like Chinese, because it usually requires more time and effort to learn. Immediate gains can motivate beginner learners and potentially increase

retention rates. Factors identified in this study, including having native-speaking teachers who prioritise intercultural pedagogy and student-centred learning, employing a language-character separated mode and a holistic instructional approach focusing on communicative and interactive practices, and association with learners' real-life experiences, may help reduce beginner learners' perceived difficulty level of Chinese, giving them hope for greater achievement in later stages.

Conflict of interest

Authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Appendix 1. Tasks that were used for course design

Tasks	Learning goals	Input data	Learner procedures and activities
1. Connecting word cards into sentences	Communicative, language and cultural awareness-related goals	Authentic spoken language gained through greetings and introductions; data provided by the teacher	This task is used in the first lesson. To begin the lesson, the teacher introduces herself in Chinese. The students need to use their previous knowledge to guess what the teacher says. By working in groups, the students need to connect word cards into sentences according to what they hear and infer the meaning of the sentences. After understanding how to introduce oneself in Chinese, the students need to find out the way to introduce themselves in Chinese, too. Greeting culture is discussed in the post-task phase.
2. Surveying several classmates and reporting the results (used in various teaching units)	Communicative, language and cultural awareness-related goals	Authentic spoken language was gained from conversations with classmates; data provided by the teacher	The students are required to individually survey several classmates and then report the results. Relevant cultural elements are discussed in each task.
3. Interviewing Chinese people in the classroom	Communicative, sociocultural, and cultural awareness-related goals	Authentic spoken language was gained from conversations with native speakers. Student-generated task	Several Chinese people are invited to be interviewed by the students in the classroom. The students plan interview questions and negotiate the questions' sequence in small groups.
4. Quiz battle for reviewing previous lessons	Communicative, language and cultural awareness-related goals	Knowledge from previous teaching units was provided by the teacher	The students work in small groups to solve a predesigned quiz and compete with other groups. The quizzes consist of many tasks on small scales and contain both linguistic and cultural questions.
5. Role-play: ordering food	Communicative, language and cultural awareness-related goals	Spoken data was generated by the students in the role-play	The students plan and complete the task in small groups. Chinese, Danish, and other countries' cuisine cultures are compared and discussed.
6. Group work: teaching beginners Chinese language and culture	Communication, learning-how-to-learn, language and cultural awareness	Authentic data from books and internet, generated by the students	The students work in small groups. They are required to negotiate and plan the task over a certain time span. The students set realistic objectives and study what they want to. Some groups choose to focus on cultural learning.

Appendix 2. Sample questions from surveys

Pre-course survey:

- 1) What is your previous knowledge and experience concerning China and the Chinese language? (Open-ended question)
- 2) How difficult do you assume learning Chinese to be? (Please rate 1–5 from very difficult to very easy.)
And why do you think so? (Open-ended question)
- 3) What are your preferred methods of learning a foreign language? (Open-ended question)
- 4) What do you expect to achieve in this course? (Open-ended question)
- 5) Why did you choose this course? (Open-ended question)
- 6) What aspects of the Chinese language do you expect to learn? (Open-ended question)

Post-course survey:

1. How much do you think the course supported you in learning Chinese?
1 = Very unsatisfactory ... 5 = very satisfactory
2. To what degree did the course content and materials meet your expectations and match interests for learning Chinese? (Please rate 1–5 from very low to very high.)
Please specify the positive aspects. (Open-ended question)

Please specify the negative aspects. (Open-ended question)

3. To what degree did the course teaching method, namely the task-based method, motivate you and match your preferences in relation to learning Chinese? (Please rate 1–5 from very low to very high.)

Please specify the positive aspects. (Open-ended question)

Please specify the negative aspects. (Open-ended question)

4. To what degree do you think learning about a culture (e.g. Chinese culture) is relevant to and important for learning its language (e.g. Chinese)? (Please rate 1–5 from very low to very high.)

Please elaborate: (Open-ended question)

5. How would you rate the overall difficulty level of the course? (Please rate 1–5 from very difficult to very easy.)

6. What do you think of the difficulty of learning Chinese right now, after the course? 1 = Very difficult ... 5 = very easy

7. Will you continue studying Chinese in the future?

☐
☐
☐
☐

Yes, I will.

I don't know

Maybe.

No, I won't.

8. Your comments and suggestions for the course's future development. (Open-ended question)

Appendix 3. The interview guide

1. In general, what did you think of learning Chinese in this course? How did the course match your learning preferences and motivate you to learn Chinese?
2. How did you perceive the course content and materials in relation to your expectations and motivation for learning Chinese?
3. How did you perceive the teaching methods, specifically task-based teaching and learning, in relation to your preferred ways of learning a foreign language, and in particular, learning Chinese?
4. What did you think of learning Chinese language and culture in an integrated way?
5. How did you perceive learning a 'difficult' language such as Chinese using a task-based approach before and after the course?
6. Would you consider continuing to learn Chinese?

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